

Against the Grain

Volume 21 | Issue 3

Article 12

June 2009

Back Talk -- There is an Old Saying that Goes...

Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson

University of Hong Kong, ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Anthony (Tony) W. (2009) "Back Talk -- There is an Old Saying that Goes...," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 3, Article 12.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2312>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Back Talk — There is an Old Saying that Goes ...

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong;
Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>



There is an old saying that goes “no good turn goes unpunished.” That is, paradoxically, it seems that whenever you try to do something good for someone, you will somehow suffer for the effort. Recently, I had that feeling regarding the decision to open the **Main Library** 24 hours per day and seven days per week.

The intention, or the good turn, was to keep the library open during the reading and examination weeks so that our students could prepare themselves for their examinations. Our punishments thus far have been threefold:

- The costs associated with providing security during the post 11:00 p.m. night hours when our staff goes home to eat and sleep have been fairly significant.
- The costs for extra cleaning staff to come in early in the morning to clean up after the hundreds of students who eat and drink while they are studying have mounted up.
- The need to deal with the anger expressed by some students, toward other students who attempt to lay claim to their favorite study tables, has been frustrating.

We are not new to the business of operating a round-the-clock study facility. We have had a 24/7 Student Learning Centre in the Main Library for the past four years. It is located on the ground floor next to **Starbucks**. It is situated there because it is the one section of the library which has its own rear entrance as well as a lockable doorway into the library itself. This means we can lock it off from the Main Library at closing time, and then allow students to use their electronic ID cards to get into the back entrance whenever they like during the night until in the morning at 8:30 a.m. when the Main Library reopens. Since we don't have any books stored in the Student Learning Centre, we don't need any additional staff to operate the facility, and for human security we rely upon cameras in the facility which can be monitored by the campus security office. This system works well to provide upwards of 80 students with an overnight safe and air conditioned

study area. We even have vending with hot and cold drinks as well as snacks to help those who use it to keep their energy levels up.

Opening the entire Main Library to help hundreds of students prepare for their examinations, on the other hand, poses a much larger problem. Since it is filled with valuable books, journals, and computer equipment, we knew we needed to hire guards to take over after the time when the last of our staff went home for the night. We began with the idea that we would need two guards to allow one to circulate the five floors of the building while the other one stayed at the main doorway. Most of our library materials employ an **RFID** security system. However, since part of our collection lacks the **RFID** system, we found we needed to provide another pair of guards to deal with that part of the Main Library. Four guards for three weeks of course means a fairly significant amount of expense — yet, this extra expense to help students is a good investment, right?

Opening the Main Library all night long means another nine hours of use. As any parent with teenagers and young adults in the family knows, young people can make a mess. Actually all humans make a mess. And hundreds of people means hundreds of tissues, hundreds of empty water bottles, hundreds of scraps of paper, hundreds of paper wrappers from food consumed, hundreds of chairs and tables moved right and left, and thousands of books pulled out of the stacks and left lying around after they are used. All of these messes have to be cleaned up or the whole enterprise can go bad. When a facility is in an orderly well kept condition, most of the people who enter it act in an orderly fashion. Just the opposite can happen when a facility is in dirty and disorganized. Consequently, our decision to keep the library open all night meant that we needed to hire an extra cleaner to at least empty all the rubbish bins at the beginning of the evening. Early in the morning, however, after hundreds of messes were made, hundreds of new readers would descend upon the library beginning at 8:00 a.m. We found we needed to hire some extra help to get the library in super clean shape before it became mobbed with new

students. Extra cleaners on a daily basis mean extra expenses — yet, this extra expense to help students is a good investment, right?

Opening the library 24/7 produced another problem: Some students decide to take advantage of this opportunity to lock their computer to their favorite desk or otherwise pile their personal belongings on that desk. Then they will leave knowing that no one else can use the desk and that they can come back and use it anytime they want. Since we only have 1,200 seats in the library, however, when student 1,201 comes in we have a problem. If every seat had a student sitting on it, the new student would understand. Yet the problem is, many seats are empty but the desk has a computer or a pile of books and papers on it. In the words of one student who wrote me:

“I did a quick count this morning when I arrived at 10 a.m. on the second floor. There are totally 68 seats, 8 of them were occupied by students. 60 of them [occupied] by papers and books. 13 people were either standing, sitting on couches, or in front of the computers. I removed a book, a hand cream and a pen from a desk yesterday and placed them at one of the computer tables and they are still there untouched... The problem is a very serious one. Students clearly abuse the concession from the library.”

Last semester we tried clearing desks that had lain idle for two hours or longer but that just resulted in disputes with students who complained that they had just stepped away when the library staff member came by their desk. We also detected that while seats with electrical outlets were in high demand, those without might stand idle. Consequently, for this term we added another 500 electric outlets in order to increase the number of attractive seats. It appears that this latter act was a success but the result is even more students coming to the library to study and use their laptops at the same time. Since the ability of students to “stake out” a seat was based upon the premise that the library never closed for three weeks, this year, when the Swine Flu arrived, we took advantage of the need to disinfect desks and now close it for two hours in the early morning for cleaning. This means students have to take their computers and things out at least for a couple of hours. The result has been the daily queuing up of a hundred or so students all rushing for their favorite seats — but it does give everyone willing to line up at 8:00 in the morning a fresh chance to get a coveted seat. Once again we have spent more money and effort: more electrical outlets, staff to deal with angry students, cleaners to disinfect desks — yet, this extra expense to help students is a good investment, right?

We do think these extra investments are worth it. But, since no good turn goes unpunished, what is next? 🐷

Column Editor's Note: This article is also appearing in **Focus**, HKUL's library newsletter. Visit <http://lib.hku.hk/general/focus/>. — AF

ADVERTISERS' INDEX

9	ACS	3	BLACKWELL BOOK SERVICES	27	IGI GLOBAL
13	AMBASSADOR BOOKS AND MEDIA	95	BOOK HOUSE	79	INTELECOM
65	AMERICAN ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION	83	THE CHARLESTON ADVISOR	89	McFARLAND
35	AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF PHYSICS	10	THE CHARLESTON REPORT	96	MIDWEST LIBRARY SERVICE
41	AMERICAN PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY	7	COLD SPRING HARBOR LAB PRESS	17	OECD
23	ANNUAL REVIEWS	19	COUTTS	21	THE OPTICAL SOCIETY
29	APPI	2	CRC PRESS/TAYLOR & FRANCIS GROUP	49	PROJECT MUSE
37	ASBMB	53	EASTERN BOOK COMPANY	61	RITTENHOUSE
45	ASME INTERNATIONAL	43	EBSCO INFORMATION	39	SIAM
5	ATG	75	THE ENDOCRINE SOCIETY	25	WILEY
91	BASCH SUBSCRIPTIONS, INC.	11	IEEE	33	YBP
31	BEGELL HOUSE PUBLISHERS	15	IGI GLOBAL		

For Advertising Information Contact: **Edna Laughrey**, Ads Manager,
<elaughrey@aol.com>, Phone: 734-429-1029, Fax: 734-429-1711; or **Toni Nix**,
<justwrite@lowcountry.com>, Phone: 843-835-8604, Fax: 843-835-5892.